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SUBJECT: HAN SEUNG-SOO TAPPED AS LEE MYUNG-BAK'S FIRST
PRIME MINISTER

11. (SBU) Summary: President-elect Lee Myung-bak officially announced the nomination of Han Seung-soo, UN Special Envoy on Climate Change, as the first Prime Minister for his government. Lee is said to have taken into account Han's extensive experience with state affairs and his credentials as a global leader. His confirmation hearing motion will be submitted to the National Assembly soon, and will be voted on shortly after the inauguration on February 25. End Summary.

The Announcement

12. (SBU) In a press conference on January 28, President-elect Lee Myung-bak officially nominated Dr. Han Seung-soo as the first Prime Minister for the incoming administration. In the press announcement, President-elect Lee cited Han's global outlook and diverse experience at home and abroad. Lee also referenced Han's work in previous administrations, which, Lee said, qualified Han to work well within the Cabinet, the government, and the international community. Prime Minister-nominee Han referred to China's "resource diplomacy" and said he would work hard to turn Korea into a global nation. Concerning some possible controversy surrounding his past involvement with the Chung Doo-hwan military government's Special Committee for National Security Measures, Han said that he was called on to take charge of financial matters in the economic crisis that followed President Park's death.

Biographic Information

13. (SBU) Han has enjoyed a distinguished career over more than three decades with the political, governmental, and academic circles. Born in Chuncheon, Gangwon Province in 1936, Han earned his Bachelor's in political science and international relations from Yonsei University, a Master's in public administration from Seoul National University, and a Master's and a Doctorate in economics from York University in the U.K. He has been a professor of economics at York University, Cambridge University, and Seoul National University for nearly 20 years, and he has lectured at

Harvard University and Tokyo University. He served ministerial posts three times in as many different administrations: Commerce and Industry Minister in the Roh Tae-woo government; Deputy Prime Minister and Finance & Economy Minister in the Kim Young-sam government; and Foreign Minister in the Kim Dae-jung government. He also has worked as a financial advisor to the Venezuelan government, to the World Bank, and to the Jordanian government.

¶4. (SBU) He entered the bureaucracy in 1987 as the first Chairman of the International Trade Committee of the Commerce & Industry Ministry. He was then elected to the National Assembly the following year from his hometown district on the then ruling Democratic Justice Party ticket. Since then he served in multiple posts in the Roh Tae-woo Administration as an international trade expert.

¶5. (SBU) Subsequently in the Kim Young-sam Administration, Han served as the ROK Ambassador to the United States, Presidential Chief of Staff, and Deputy Prime Minister for Finance & Economy, from which he resigned after only seven months due to the Hanbo Steel bankruptcy case. After a brief return to his professorial job, he tried to run in the 2000 general elections for the National Assembly, but lost the Grand National Party nomination. He quickly left the party and instead made a come-back by joining the minor Democratic People's Party.

¶6. (SBU) In the Kim Dae-jung Administration, Han mainly served in an international capacity, including as the Korea Committee Chairman at the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), ROK Foreign Minister, and the UN General Assembly President. In the Roh Moo-hyun Administration, he served as the Chairman of the 2014 Pyongchang Winter Olympic Games Bidding Committee before being appointed the UN Special Envoy on Climate Change in May 2007.

¶7. (SBU) Some possible points of controversy at the upcoming confirmation hearings include his involvement with the Chun Doo-hwan government in the early 1980s, and his image as an opportunistic politician, given his frequent change in party affiliations.

Economic Credentials Will Shape Job

¶8. (SBU) Given President-elect Lee's commitment to economic growth and Han's vast experience, the incoming prime minister will probably have an independent role in international and government affairs, especially important national agenda items such as energy and climate change, rather than working as a presidential assistant like previous prime ministers. In his statement immediately following the nomination, Han said that he believed the worsening external economic environment could be overcome by deregulation and more private sector investment. As a dedicated advocate for market economy, Han has long supported a complete economic liberalization and deregulation to that end.

Appointment Helps Political Stability

¶9. (SBU) Han's nomination highlights President-elect Lee's strictly businesslike approach. After over a month-long search, the President-elect apparently considered Han to be the one fit for multi-tasking in a global economic and diplomatic environment. With both globally-oriented and business-oriented mindset, Han was considered the most qualified for the "resource diplomacy" with Russia, Africa, and the Middle East, as Lee's government will likely try to pursue. The fact that Lee has no personal connections with Han further shows the President-elect's focus on professionalism.

¶10. (SBU) Han is distantly related to former GNP Chairperson

Park Geun-hye through marriage. (NOTE: Han's wife is the niece of former First Lady Yook Young-soo, President Park Chung-hee's wife. This makes Han a cousin by marriage to Park Geun-hye. END NOTE.) This made him an all the more attractive candidate, since the President-elect wanted to solidify party unity within the GNP in the run-up to the April 9 general elections by improving relations with the Park faction.

¶11. (SBU) Another attraction was that Han hails from Gangwon Province, and graduated from Yonsei University, both of which would successfully offset Lee Myung-bak's regional support base (Gyeongsang Province and Seoul) and Korea University connections. Han's age was once pointed out as a weak point, but his active presence demonstrated by his recent chairmanship of the Pyongchang Winter Olympic Bidding Committee rendered such concerns groundless.

¶12. (SBU) He is known to be gentle but also very precise at work. He likes mountaineering. He is married to Hong So-ja, former Vice President of the Korea Red Cross and current President of the Korea University Female Alumni Association, with one son and one daughter.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) President-elect Lee is said to have personally held in-depth interviews with around 20 likely candidates for Prime Minister and other Cabinet Ministers. This is considered a radical departure from the customary practices of making a decision based mainly on government documents. Reactions of political parties sharply differed over the news of Han's nomination. While the GNP remained positive and hopeful, other parties pointed to Han's past record with the authoritarian government, and indicated there would be a strict screening process at his confirmation hearing. The Transition Team plans to submit Han's confirmation motion to the National Assembly today, and follow up with the naming of

the Blue House Chief of Staff soon, as well as with other Blue House aides later this week.
STANTON